

The Weight of Nothing

by Nova42

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Summary: He wasn't sure how much loss a person could hold without it crushing them. He carried a graveyard around on his soul full of ghosts and grief, full of all that he'd lost and those he couldn't bring back. He never noticed how heavy absence was until it was resting in his hands, until he found himself suffocating under the weight of nothing. Tag to 11x17 Red Meat.

The Weight of Nothing

****Spoilers: ****11x17 Red Meat.

****A/N: ****I know, I'm about a week late, but after watching the episode Red Meat, I felt the need to write a tag for it. I know, there are already like 14 tags to this episode but I felt the need to add my own bit to the pot. This tag will be at least a two parter, first part is below (obviously) and the second should be along (hopefully) soon.

****Side Note:**** Had to delete and re-upload the story, apologies to anyone who got a bad link or rejected review.

Please R&R and I hope y'all enjoy.

* * *

><p>You boys die more than anyone I've ever met.

They say when standing on the brink of death your life flashes before your eyesâ€”your hopes, your regrets, your "should-a, would-a, could-a," wishes and wants. They say these things all play out like some well-worn filmstrip, but Dean's died enough times to know that's not true, not really. He's died in multiple ways: fast, slow, drawn out over the course of a year. Sometimes it was a painful struggle to release that last exhale, and other times it was over before he knew it was happening. Sometimes it was a kind of coldness that crept up

and settled into your bones, and others it was an all-consuming heat that scorched you from the inside out, burning through the soul.

No matter how it happened, the fact still remained that his life never flashed before his eyes. There had never been last-minute regrets, no things he wished he could have done better, not that he didn't have those things. He had plenty of regretsâ€”a whole legion of things he wished he could have done betterâ€”but none of those things ever came to mind while he lay on his proverbial deathbed. There was only ever pain or cold . . . and Sammy. Always Sammy.

_Take care of Sammy. _

Keep your brother safe, Dean.

It was an order that never had to be given; it had always been his responsibility. From the first time their mother walked through the door carrying the impossibly small life bundled in a blanket, Dean knew it would always be his job to make sure his little brother was safe, to make sure that as long as he was around nothing bad would ever happen to him.

God, how he'd failed.

Dean could remember with painful clarity each time his brother had been seriously wounded, each time he lay close to death, each and every breath that failed to come after. _Those_ were the times Dean's life flashed before his eyes; those were the times when he recalled all the things he wished he'd done better, the choices he'd have given his own life to change, the silences that should never have existed.

He watched as the werewolf shot Sam, watched as his brother gaped in shock before his knees buckled and he crashed to the floor. Dean had failed to keep his little brother safe, and it felt like the world had once more been ripped out from under his feet.

Despite the panic and overwhelming fear that threatened to drown him then and there, Dean brutally forced everything out of his mind to focus on what needed to be done: remove the bullet, stop the bleeding, save the victims, get Sam to a doctor. The news about there being othersâ€”_other_ werewolvesâ€”only helped to drive him deeper into survival mode. Once they were all safe, once his brother wasn't bleeding out and was securely bundled up in itchy hospital blankets and on so many painkillers he wouldn't know which way was up, only _then_ would Dean tuck himself away in some out-of-the-way corner and let everything crash through him, let himself feel the weight of everything that transpired and every way he failed.

When he walked back into the cabin to find his brother lying as still as death on the floor, he'd almost let all those things in. He'd been ready to let grief consume him, had been ready to let the werewolves in and either kill every last one of those sons-of-bitches or die trying.

_I guess that's what I do. I let down the people I love. I let Dad down. _

And now I guess I'm just supposed to let you down, too.

He'd been denied the chance to grieve by the lives of those still depending on him for survival, so Dean shoved everything down once more, focused single-mindedly on the task at hand, and let that carry him through the rest of the day. He hadn't allowed himself the luxury to stop to think about anything; it'd all been action and reaction.

Then Corbin dropped to reveal an injured but very alive Sam standing in the middle of the hallway. Dean felt relief rush over him, much like the fistful of drugs he'd swallowed not even an hour ago. The relief in itself had nearly been enough to do him in, and he'd practically passed out all over again. The only thing keeping him conscious was the knowledge that his brother was still in rough shape, still in desperate need of medical care. It had taken him a few minutes to push back the darkness crowding the edges of his vision and gather himself enough to make it the few feet to his brother's side.

In the end, it had been Michelle that fetched a doctor and found someone to take care of Doctor Kessler—who'd been lucky enough to only be knocked out. Dean hadn't been able to do much of anything, and everything he had been able to do, none of it had made a difference.

I don't need to feel like hell for failing you, okay? For failing you like I've failed every other godforsaken thing that I care about!_

Dean dragged a hand down his face, squinting in the light of the dying sun as it cut like knives through his already aching head. He wanted to drive straight through to the bunker; it was only a twenty hour drive, and he'd made it further under less steam. For everything that had happened, he hadn't actually felt too bad . . . at first. But it wasn't long into the drive when the adrenaline that had been coursing through his veins—natural and otherwise—finally gave out, and he began to feel every bump and bruise, every sore and aching muscle and each broken piece of rib scraping along the inside of his chest with every breath he attempted. He felt dizzy and nauseous and hot and cold all at the same time. His heart was racing too fast, and his head felt too light. He felt his walls wearing away like a straw dam caught in a flood, tugged down by the weight of all of those things he'd been trying to not think about, to keep at bay.

Convincing Sam to stop without giving himself away hadn't been hard; the drugs the clinic had given his brother when they'd stitched him up were starting to wear off, and Sam had been quick to agree that spending another fifteen hours cramped in the car sounded more like cruel torture, even if it meant spending the night in some little fleabag motel.

Dean slowly turned the wheel, guiding the Impala into the parking lot of a nicer motel one block farther down the road. Something a few steps up from their normal haunt, something less likely to fester a life-threatening infection within his little brother.

* * *

><p>When you thought I was dead . . . what did you

do?

Thought about redecorating your room, you know, putting in a Jacuzzi, a nice disco ballâ€"really class up the joint.

Sam didn't believe for a second that Dean hadn't thought him dead. He'd known his brother all his life. They'd lived in each other's back pockets for more than thirty years now, and he knew without a sliver of a doubt that the only way Dean would have ever left him behind, no matter how much Sam begged him to, was if Dean thought his little brother was dead, and even _then_ it would still take some outside force to compel Dean to leave. Something like the lives of two victims who wouldn't survive without his help. Even without that knowledge, Sam could see it in Dean's posture, could see his eyes screaming the truth he refused to give words to.

Sam wasn't afraid of dying; he hadn't been for a long time. It wasn't that he _wanted_ to dieâ€"he was very much happy to stay alive and would always fight with everything he had within him to survive. It was too ingrained in him to do otherwise. But he'd seen Heaven, experienced Hell, and walked through Purgatory; he knew what each of them held.

So the next time you or your brother bite it, well, you're not going to Heaven . . . or Hell. We're gonna make a mistake and toss you out into the Empty.

The Empty, however, he knew nothing about that, and there had been no lore on it he could find. In hindsight, he should have asked Cas, but that ship has sailed, at least for now. Sam wasn't afraid of what the Empty could be. He was oddly okay with it. If his soul ended up there, there could be no deals or exchanges to bring him back. At least that's what the reaper, Billie, had said, and there was a cold comfort to be taken from that.

I had to look out for you. That's my job.

His only concern was leaving his brother behind. Dean was strong, much stronger than anyone ever gave him credit for, but he didn't do well on his own, didn't make the best choices when the only one he had to look out for was himself. Dean would never knowingly put the world or innocent people at risk, but, when it was his own wellbeing on the line, he never stopped to consider other options, safer options. He only ever considered the outcome that was best for everyone else. And, sometimes, Sam worried about what Dean would do if the worst should ever happen.

Sam could beâ€"and has beenâ€"just as bad as Dean: he could be just as single-minded and destructive in his choices when faced with the worst. There had been more than one occasion that, in his need to protect his older brother, he made the situation worse. Or, in the most recent case, unleashed a force that not only has some weird connection with Dean but also apparently wants to do a system reset on the universe. He didn't fear his own death but the impact it would have on those left behind.

Sam was painfully yanked out of his thoughts as the Impala hit a pothole while pulling into the motel parking lot. He couldn't help the small sigh of relief that slipped past his lips. Initially, he'd hoped Dean would push to make the drive all the way to the bunker,

but a few hours into the trip the drugs from the clinic had started to wear off, and he was feeling sore and stiff and longed to stretch out. When Dean suggested they stop for the night, Sam was nearly giddy at the prospect. But not solely for his own benefit. He hadn't missed Dean's ashen complexion, nor the pain that deepened the lines of his face, growing more pronounced every time the older man moved. Sam knew his brother was beat, even if he wasn't willing to admit it.

The motel looming ahead of them looked nicer than the type of place they usually stayed at, and Sam wasn't going to complain; it would be a nice change to sleep in a bed that didn't smell of stale alcohol and old cigarettes. It wasn't until after the car had pulled to a stop, ticking as she cooled and himself with one foot out the door, that he realized his brother had yet to move from behind the wheel.

"Dean?"

Dean's head jerked, just slightly, at Sam's call, but that's about the only part of his body that seemed to show any signs of life. He blinked heavily, and then with what seemed to be an inhuman amount of effort rotated his head to meet Sam's suddenly worried gaze.

Dean's complexion was an unnatural and frightening shade of white, the bruises under his eyes providing the only color. Even from across the short distance of the bench seat, Sam could see that Dean's breathing was shallow and faster than what would be expected of someone who'd spent the last handful of hours sitting still. Sam shifted on the bench, reaching a hand out so his fingers brushed against his brother's jacket. "Dean . . . you okay, man?"

Dean jerked his head once more. "Yeah." He paused, licked his lips, and then shook his head lightly. "No," he amended, his voice rough like he'd swallowed some broken glass and chased it down with a hot lava shooter.

Dean had trouble admitting to things. He wouldn't admit his feelings when the need arose, nor would he ever willingly admit to being in pain. He was hardwired to hide any and all things that could be perceived as a weakness, emotional or physical sensations. It was a lesson taught and enforced by his father, his brother, Bobby, and life in general. So when Dean Winchester—the man who'd been to Hell and back, who'd spent a year fighting to survive the unspeakable horrors of Purgatory—did see fit to admit something was wrong, that was something Sam stopped and assigned a high degree of importance to.

Dean shifted in his seat, a wince passing over his face as he brought a hand up to cradle his right side. "Might've busted some ribs."

"What? Dean, why didn't you say anything? We were just at a clinic—"

Dean held up his hand, cutting off Sam's tirade. "Chill, Francis. I did say something while you were getting sewed up. One of the nurses checked them out, and everything's where it should be."

Sam jerked his head back, opened his mouth, and then snapped it shut

once more. "You willingly sought medical treatment?" Sam paused, then added, "Christo."

Dean rolled his eyes, grimacing as he did so. "Shut up." He pressed his fingertips against his forehead. There was a very noticeable tremble in his hand that he either didn't notice or was simply too tired to hide. Both options had Sam's concern for his brother jumping up a few more notches.

"I'm just beat, man," Dean started in a low, dull voice. "It's been a long day, and we can both use some rest."

Sam pursed his lips into a thin line, knowing full well that his brother was holding something back, but he also knew that pushing Dean only caused him to retreat further or push back. Sam nodded once.

"All right, man." He started pushing himself out of the car, then paused once more, looking back at his brother. "If you need something, you know, for pain, the clinic gave me some of the good stuff, and I think I have, like, two refills on it."

Dean's eyes snapped over to meet his, and a look crossed over his face too quickly for Sam to identify before he swallowed thickly and shook his head. "Naw, man. I'm good."

"You sure?"

"Yeah." Dean sat still a moment longer, then slowly started the process of unfolding himself from the car.

Sam could tell the older man was in a considerable amount of pain, but he wasn't all too surprised that he turned down the offer for any heavy drugs. Dean had always been reluctant to take anything stronger than Tylenol, and even then it was only if he absolutely had to. Sam had never completely understood why. He could understand not taking anything that would screw with his head during a hunt, when they needed to be alert for danger, but Dean often refused it while they were safe in the bunker as well.

Sam pressed a hand over his wounded, bandaged side and looked at Dean from overtop the car. "Hey, you, uh, you okay to get the bags? And I'll check us in?"

Dean's face scrunched slightly, like it was taking him an unnecessarily long moment to process Sam's words, before finally answering, "You sure?"

"Yeah, man. I think I can make it the few yards to the front office and back."

Dean slid his eyes over to the motel, then back to Sam, and nodded. "Yeah, okay."

Sam studied his brother for a moment longer, not sure he was liking how compliant Dean seemed to be, and wonderedâ€"not for the first timeâ€"exactly what all went down when Dean thought he was dead. Lately, Dean had been more honest, more forthcoming with the sort of things he'd normally keep close to the chest if not outright lie about, and Sam didn't want to ruin that streak by pushing Dean to

talk when he wasn't willing or ready. He would wait his brother out, at least for the night, and see if Dean opened up somewhere between here and the bunker. They were both dead on their feet, and it was possible his brother just didn't want to talk about it _right now,_ rather than at all.

Sam tapped the top of the Impala before pushing off and making his way to the front office. The desk clerkâ€”an older man with a handful of graying hairs swept across his crown in some poor attempt of a comb-overâ€”squinted from behind his wide-rimmed glasses like he wasn't sure Sam could be trusted to stay in one of the rooms. He was suddenly glad Dean hadn't come in, as he was sporting bruises around his neck from Corbin's stranglehold, and a few ugly marks nestled around his left eye.

Sam relied on his best _trust me, I'm completely harmless_ smile as he handed over one of their better fake credit cards to the man and asked for two queens.

The man stared at him for a moment longer before making a grunt as he ran the card and handed it back with two keycards, mumbling something about a ten o'clock check-out time.

Sam smiled his thank-you, taking the cards and hobbling out as fast as his injured body allowed him, practically drooling at the thought of lying down and getting some real rest, some real sleep. He met Dean halfway, looking down at the cards as they walked toward the building.

"Room, uh . . . 11A. First floor." Sam was grateful for the location of the room; he didn't even want to _think_ about trying to crawl up any stairs.

He slid the keycard into the card reader and shoved the door open into a decently sized room framed by walls painted a soothing shade of light gray. On the right side of the room sat two queen-sized beds, each with a plush bluish-gray blanket that perfectly matched the carpeting stretching across the room. Directly across from the beds sat a forty-inch flat screen TV atop a dark wood dresser. A small kitchenette area with a sink, microwave, and small refrigerator sat just off to the left side of the door, and at the far end was a closed door that Sam could only assume led to the bathroom. The whole room appeared to be devoid of any stains and smelled . . . clean. Not a whiff of anything stale or unseemly that they'd come to associate with motel rooms.

Sam was a little surprised his brother would spend the money on a place this nice but wasn't going to argue the idea, and he would instead enjoy it while he could.

"Nice." He walked into the room then looked back over his shoulder at Dean. "You want first crack at the shower or . . . ?"

Dean dropped their duffels onto their respective beds and waved Sam off. "Knock yourself out, man." He paused, then wagged a finger in Sam's direction. "Be careful with those professional-grade stitches. If I have to redo any of them, they won't look as pretty."

Sam snorted. "I think I can handle a shower."

"Uh-huh."

Sam opened his duffle, rooting around until he dug out his shower bag along with a pair of sweats and the softest T-shirt he could find. He then made his way into the bathroom, finding a dark and tastefully tiled floor and wall. Studying the room, he couldn't help but wonder if the person who designed the rooms had something of an affinity for the color gray. He cast the insignificant thought aside and started shucking his clothes, winching when he came to his shirt, slowly working it off while trying to move his left arm as little as possible so not to pull at his side.

He stepped in the shower, taking a moment to enjoy the steady stream of hot water as it ran over the tense and corded muscles throughout his body. Despite how good the water felt, he showered quickly, not wanting to expose the hole in his gut to more than what was needed to get clean.

Sam dressed, dragging the towel through his hair as he stepped out of the bathroom. He paused at the door, surprised to find Dean not only already in bed—boots strewn haphazardly near the foot of his bed—but appearing to be completely passed out. He waited on the threshold and fought with himself for a moment, debating between his need to check up on his brother to make sure he was okay and the want to let the older man get the sleep he was in desperate need of.

The choice was taken out of his hands by the shrill ring of his cellphone. Sam gingerly stooped, grabbed his discarded jeans from the floor, and dug the cellphone out of the pocket, emotions caught between worry and relief when Dean didn't so much as flinch at the loud noise in the otherwise silent room. He spared his brother another glance before answering the call.

"Hello?"

"_Hi, this is Doctor Kessler—"from the Cotton Wood Urgent Care Clinic." _

Sam frowned, needing a moment to recognize the name and the doctor who'd been knocked out by Corbin not long before he arrived.

"Oh, right. Is, uh, is everything okay?" They couldn't be sure that they'd succeeded in killing all the werewolves that had been hanging around town, so before leaving Sam had left his number with one of the attending nurses in case any stragglers or anything else of a supernatural nature happened to show up.

"_Yes, everything is fine here. Is this Sam Winchester? Dean's brother?" _

"Yes," Sam answered slowly, shooting a glance across the room at his sleeping brother.

"_I woke up after . . ."_ She cleared her throat. "_Well, _after_, and was informed your brother had left without any further medical treatment." _

A line worked its way across Sam's forehead. "You mean for his ribs?" Dean already admitted to the injury and said he'd gotten his ribs checked before they left. He had no reason to lie about it, but even

if he did it seemed like an odd thing for the clinic to take the time to call about.

"_His ribs? Noâ€"I mean, they're a concern as well, but . . ."_ She paused before asking, _"Didn't he tell you?"_

A cold shiver spiked through Sam's chest, settling like a heavy weight in his stomach.

"Tell me what?"

End
file.